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Release of Daniloff opens road to summit

The Soviets have let Nicholas Daniloff leave Moscow after holding him 31 days on espionage charges. The road to a superpower summit now seems open. That much is known and is worth celebrating along with the fact that Mr. Daniloff has left the Soviet Union. But the details of the U.S.-Soviet deal that freed the newsman, and that may involve the future release of accused Soviet spy Gennadi Zakharov, aren't yet clear.

Before the controversy starts over which side blinked — as it surely shall once the facts are out — some points are worth emphasizing. Most Americans abhorred the Kremlin's outrageous equation of Mr. Zakharov, a Soviet employee at the United Nations, caught spying, with Mr. Daniloff, a respected journalist snared by Moscow in retaliation. For this reason, the simultaneous release of both arrested men into the custody of their respective ambassadors two weeks ago made some Kremlin watchers here uneasy.

But the Soviet leadership, in the manner in which they freed Mr. Daniloff, effectively dropped their prior

insistence on that quid pro quo. Mr. Daniloff was not put on trial. He left Moscow before any change was made in Mr. Zakharov's status. And Moscow let him leave with a valid Soviet re-entry visa in his passport and his press card in hand. These documents, seized when Mr. Daniloff was imprisoned, were returned to him before his departure. By this act, the Soviets in effect conceded his legitimate standing as an American newsman, not a spy.

The rest of the deal — and its likely impact on U.S. attempts to limit Soviet spying at the United Nations, or on the future safety of U.S. journalists in Moscow — can be judged only when the facts become known. But it seems to have provided an acceptable way out of a dilemma created by the misjudgments of both superpowers: the United States by mistiming and poor handling of the Zakharov arrest, and the Soviets — to a far greater degree — by miscalculating public reaction to the seizure of a U.S. journalist. That reaction, and its near derailment of a summit, should give Moscow pause in the future.